



Challenges and Rewards of Working with International Students

This year we have international students and dual citizens from Bahamas, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, China, Colombia, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Guatemala, India, Iran, Israel, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Kenya, Lithuania, Malaysia, Mauritius, Mexico, Netherlands, Nigeria, Pakistan, Paraguay, Philippines, Poland, Russia, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, and United Kingdom along with a few U.S. Citizens that have been educated overseas (China, Italy, Luxemburg, Poland, Qatar, South Korea, Thailand, and United Arab Emirates).

Please note that every student is different. Although there are some generalizations that can be drawn about the United States, keep in mind the cultural differences between people from New York City, Atlanta, Chicago, Austin and San Francisco. So, just because a student is from Country X, does not mean they will necessarily act like the generalization of that country. Just think about the bell curve, and don't forget about the outliers.

Hofstede's Intercultural Dimensions

Thankfully we have a wealth of studies that focus on ways to quantify cultural differences. One of the most utilized tools to quantify these cultural differences in international education is Hofstede's Intercultural Dimensions. Hofstede focuses on four main dimensions: Power Distance, Individualism, Uncertainty Avoidance, and Masculinity.

Power Distance

This dimension relates to the degree of equality/inequality between people in a particular society.

- A country with a high Power Distance score both accepts and perpetuates inequalities between people. An example of such a society would be one that follows a caste system and in which upward mobility is very limited.
- A low Power Distance indicates that a society does not emphasize differences in people's status, power or wealth. Equality is seen as the collective aim of society and upward mobility is common.

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Individualism

This dimension focuses on the degree to which a society reinforces individual or collective achievement and interpersonal relationships.

- If a country has a high Individualism score, this indicates that individuality and individual rights are dominant. Individuals in these societies tend to form relationships with larger numbers of people, but with the relationships being weak.
- A low Individualism score points to a society that is more collectivist in nature. In such countries the ties between individuals are very strong and the family is given much more weight. In such societies members lean towards collective responsibility.

Uncertainty Avoidance

This dimension concerns the level of acceptance for uncertainty and ambiguity within a society.

- A country with a high Uncertainty Avoidance score will have a low tolerance towards uncertainty and ambiguity. As a result it is usually a very rule-orientated society and follows well defined and established laws, regulations and controls.
- A low Uncertainty Avoidance score points to a society that is less concerned about ambiguity and uncertainty and has more tolerance towards variety and experimentation. Such a society is less rule-orientated, readily accepts change and is willing to take risks.

Masculinity

This dimension pertains to the degree societies reinforce, or do not reinforce, the traditional masculine work role model of male achievement, control, and power.

- A high Masculinity score indicates that a country experiences a higher degree of gender differentiation. In such cultures, males tend to dominate a significant portion of the society and power structure.
- A low Masculinity score means a society has a lower level of differentiation and inequity between genders. In these cultures, females are treated equally to males in all aspects of the society.

English Language Ability

The international students in your classes may also have varying levels of English language ability. Some of our international students have lived in the U.S. most of their lives, and speak English perfectly. Other students have been able to come to the U.S. for their high school education and are likely to have good English as well as an understanding of the U.S. educational system. Lastly, there will be some students for whom this is their first time outside of their home country and they may have some trouble speaking and understanding English. Some of these students have only had the opportunity to learn English from English speaking locals in their home country, and have never spoken with a native English speaker prior to their arrival at Southwestern. So, please be aware of the language that you use in class. Idioms and slang, while fairly common-place even in a university setting, are likely to be unfamiliar to these students.

In order to be respectful of all students, please make sure that you give all assignments in written form. You can talk about them orally, but supply written information as well to be absolutely certain that all U.S. and International students receive the same information about the assignment.

International students offer a unique point of view in the classroom and can help to enrich any discussion. We hope you will enjoy having these students in your class.

Tips for Working with International Students in the Classroom

Professor as Expert: in many countries, the professor is the expert and authority. Discussion and questions in class are often discouraged. International students may express frustration or confusion when a professor does not meet this expert expectation.

Faculty accessibility: students are often surprised at how accessible faculty members are in the U.S. Faculty may consider explaining the purpose of office hours and specify whether students should make appointments or plan to just drop by.

Classroom behavior: many academic settings abroad are very formal. International students may be surprised that American students eat or drink in class, for example. Behavioral expectations should be stated clearly early in the semester.

Class participation: as mentioned above, open discourse may be uncomfortable for international students. If participation is a required component of the course, it may help break the ice to allow each student in the class to introduce themselves at the beginning of the semester, and then be invited throughout to contribute to class discussion. International students may also find more comfort in group/collaborative projects.

Writing/research expectations: it is essential to clarify early in the semester what constitutes plagiarism. Research and writing expectations vary widely in other countries, and detailed explanations will be key to international student success. Referrals to Library staff and the Writing Center can be beneficial as well.

Seeking assistance: many cultures view asking for help/support as a signal of weakness or as causing trouble. Please help students understand the value of seeking additional resources in times of struggle. The Center for Academic Success and Records (1st floor, Prothro Center; x1286) and the Office of Intercultural Learning (2nd floor, Prothro Center; x1857) can assist.